

First Responders Armed with Improved Communication Assets as Hurricane Season Looms

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BATON ROUGE – When hurricane season officially begins June 1, first responders will be armed with improved communication that will increase their ability to correspond and coordinate services in any parishes impacted by a storm, courtesy of the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

Louisiana's interoperable communications system was significantly impaired during hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005; more shortfalls were experienced during hurricanes Gustav and Ike in 2008. The state's first responders experienced failures and inadequacies with the system performance while working throughout the storms.

Communications interoperability is how emergency service agencies interact across disciplines and jurisdictions through wireless networks.

With \$17.1 million in funding from the state Office of Community Development-Disaster Recovery Unit, GOHSEP, in coordination with the Statewide Interoperable Executive Committee, addressed those needs through improvements to the Louisiana Wireless Information Network. LWIN is a complex two-way radio interoperable communications system that provides mission-critical communications to more than 70,000 first responders across the state.

The funds to upgrade the LWIN system were Community Development Block Grant recovery dollars allocated to the state from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for recovery from hurricanes Gustav and Ike, and it was the first time that CDBG funds were used for such a purpose.

"GOHSEP and the SIEC expressed a need for improvements to the state's emergency communications system following hurricanes Gustav and Ike, and we worked with HUD to create this Interoperable Communications program, the first of its kind to use HUD dollars," said Pat Forbes, executive director of the Office of Community Development. "Having seen how first responders were better able to communicate during Hurricane Isaac, we have demonstrated the value of the investment, and citizens can feel safer knowing this equipment is available if there is another hurricane or other disaster."

"Communication is the key element to all aspects of emergency management," says GOHSEP Director Kevin Davis. "This network helps ensure our first responders and others can relay critical information to

each other and to the public. When Louisiana faces a hurricane or tropical event, it will help us maintain that information flow from the preparedness phase through response and recovery.”

The new communication devices were used during Hurricane Isaac in 2012 with much success.

During Isaac, 68,203 first responders used the network at 118 sites, up from 34,818 responders using the LWIN at 53 sites during the 2008 storms. The number of available channels increased 44 percent, from 476 to 1,076. Additionally, there were more than 9 million active calls recorded during Hurricane Isaac, up from 5.7 million during hurricanes Gustav and Ike, and the number of calls not getting through was reduced by approximately 60 percent.

The system uses existing land telephone lines, referred to as T-1 lines, to connect repeaters – the electronic frequency devices that transmit radio communications – to one of four Master Sites, allowing for communication to areas outside the transmitting tower’s broadcast range.

The Disaster Recovery Unit within the Office of Community Development is dedicated to helping Louisiana's citizens recover from hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, Ike and Isaac. As the state's central point for hurricane recovery, the OCD-DRU manages the most extensive rebuilding effort in American history, working closely with local, state and federal partners to ensure that Louisiana recovers safer, stronger and smarter than before.

Citizens can receive emergency alerts on most smart phones and tablets by downloading the new ALERT FM App. It is free for basic service. Citizens can also download the new Louisiana Emergency Preparedness Guide and find other important information at www.getagameplan.org. The Get a Game Plan App is also available for download to smart phones or tablets.

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